

Reinterpretation of Contrast Across Language
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Speakers confronted with structures that are not found in their native language often employ systematic adaptation patterns which can be described by means of ranked constraints. In many cases, however, these rankings are not obviously motivated by the data of either the native or the foreign language. Nor do these rankings necessarily correspond to what have been claimed to be universal default rankings; for example, in borrowings into Fijian, English [b] is realized as [mb] (Kenstowicz 2003), in violation of the putative universal ranking IDnas >> IDvoi (Steriade 2001). Furthermore, the rankings associated with foreign word modification may be antithetical to the rankings needed to describe native patterns; in Shona, for example, the quality of vowels inserted in borrowed words is dependent on nearby consonant and vowel quality, while vowels inserted to repair minimality violations in native vocabulary are always the default [i], regardless of phonetic context. Facts like these, as well as the tendency for greater tolerance of some foreign structures over other (equally foreign) structures, have led to the assumption of different subgrammars associated with different lexical strata, each with their own set of rankings.

Given the general assumption that constraints are universal but rankings are language-specific, we need to explain how speakers would have arrived at these particular subgrammar rankings—not an easy task when the only evidence for the rankings rests in the modification patterns themselves. I will argue that many of the patterns used to motivate particular loanword rankings do not in fact reflect the rankings of the production grammar; rather, they reflect listeners' attempts to interpret the acoustic data in terms of their native language system of contrast.